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Sask.'s reporting on COVID-19 recoveries is deceptive, says long-hauler

COVID-19 patients no longer need a negative test to be considered recovered

Mickey Djuric · CBC News · Posted: Feb 03, 2021 4:00 AM CT | Last Updated: February 3

Saskatchewan no longer requires someone to test negative for COVID-19 in order to be labelled as 'recovered'. (Ringo Chiu/AFP/Getty Images)

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Aj Thakker can't smell, can't taste, can't concentrate. The Lumsden, Sask., man says he has a new symptom of COVID-19 every day.

And as he goes through his list of symptoms (joint pain, blurry vision, confusion), it would be hard for one to tell he's gotten the good news that he's "recovered."

Thakker, who tested positive for COVID-19 in early January, was told he could leave quarantine 10 days after testing positive. Despite still having symptoms, and never getting a negative test result, he was once again free to go to public places.

"They didn't recommend it," Thakker said of getting another test.

Aj Thakker was diagnosed with COVID-19 in early January. Despite being labelled as "recovered", Thakker continues to experience daily symptoms. (AJ Thakker)

How recoveries are reported

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Health said a negative test is no longer a requirement for a person to be labelled "recovered."

"In Saskatchewan, you are publicly reported as recovered 10 days after a positive test result."

This is a change from previous criteria, which was receiving a negative test result with no symptoms for 48 hours or completing 14 days of self-isolation.

On Jan. 26, the government quietly changed how it reported recoveries.

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This new method is in line with other provinces and came into effect after Health Canada found people are not likely contagious 10 days after being infected.

Kyle Anderson, a University of Saskatchewan biomedical professor, says the 10-day system is a valid one because it becomes easier to maintain, plus it puts less strain on public health because less resources are used to follow up on infected people.

Being labelled as recovered when sick

But for people like Thakker, who are having ongoing health concerns due to COVID-19, the word "recovered" can be a troubling term to come to grips with.

Thakker is calling on the government to report recoveries more transparently and to clarify that a recovery does not mean people are symptom-free.

"Recovering is when people can say 'I'm back to my life again, and back to work, and back to functioning.'"

She had COVID-19 symptoms in March, but she never got better

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Susie Goulding says she feels like she's living with a 'broken brain.' She started experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 in March 2020 and has paid hundreds of dollars for private medical treatment because, she says, she hasn't been able to access the care she needs in the public system. 1:00

Thakker is not sure when his life will return to normal as a functioning member of society.

"I feel like I've aged a whole bunch of years in a really short window. 2021, it's been a tough one," Thakker said. His symptoms persist a month after being diagnosed.

"I've lost a bunch of weight. I can't do stuff I'd normally do. And that's OK, that's reality now. You wait, you wait and you wait. And you try to reassure the people in your life [who] are concerned."

- MARKETPLACE **60% of COVID-19 long-haulers say government is 'absolutely ignoring them,' Marketplace questionnaire finds**

More transparency around recoveries

Though Anderson supports the protocol, he feels the lack of communication to the public is "deceptive and dishonest."

Kyle Anderson, a University of Saskatchewan biomedical professor, says the government should be more transparent about its COVID-19 numbers. (Kyle Anderson/Facebook)

"Especially when we're not telling the public we've switched the methods. That's really sort of problematic because it could be perceived as being a way to make our numbers look better than they actually are."

Active cases of COVID-19 compared to cases that are considered contagious under the province's 10-day method of counting recoveries. (Kyle Anderson)

Anderson is calling on the government to clearly label what recoveries and active cases mean in Saskatchewan. This is something Thakker also thinks is necessary.

"There are ramifications we're not seeing," Thakker said. "I think people take it lightly when they say 20 people got sick today and 50 people recovered. And you think, 'That's not actually how it works.' A good portion won't recover for months."

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Canadians who experience symptoms of COVID-19 for weeks or months after first getting ill told CBC's Marketplace and The National they are struggling to access the medical care they need. Countries such as the U.K., meanwhile, are funding specific health-care services for those known as long-haulers. 4:31

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